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ABSTRACT

By the nature of their positions in schools, administrators are either influence agents or targets. Based on personal interviews with 140 Oregon administrators and a survey of 319 administrators around the state, this article highlights administrators' comments about their administrative influence and about constraints on their influence. Superintendents perceived themselves as the key influence agents within their school districts. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), superintendents' average administrative influence score was 4.5, whereas principals' and other administrators' scores were in the 3.8 to 3.7 range. The answers of principals and other administrators suggest they did not perceive themselves as the key influence agent, but rather a potential agent or target of the superintendent. While some superintendents mentioned no constraints, others mentioned problems with collective bargaining, legal authority, nepotism, negative policies and inbred structure, and slow decision-making processes. Principals desired more influence on district decisions and less interference from central office demands. Superintendents attributed district constraints to lack of staff support and cooperation, whereas principals and vice principals attributed constraints to lack of support from central office personnel who do not understand their individual school building problems and personal biases. Active, honest, and regular communication among all administrators could improve this situation. (MLH)

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OSSC REPORT

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Superintendents: The Key Influence Agents

Randy Powell, Ph.D.

In 1987 I participated in the Oregon Project LEAD study, which involved personal interviews with 140 Oregon school administrators and analysis of questionnaires returned in a survey of 319 school administrators from around the state. The administrators included superintendents, principals, vice-principals, curriculum directors, business managers, and personnel directors. Generally, the interviews focused around the notion of *influence*.

After countless hours of pondering what Oregon public school administrators had said about their administrative influence and constraints to their influence, I formulated some perspectives about issues on which administrators agree and those on which they differ. From those perspectives I constructed the following questions.

- What group or groups of Oregon school administrators perceived themselves to be the predominant influence agent responsible for

guiding educational change?

- What did those people consider to be constraints to their administrative influence?

This article focuses, then, on the two key issues of administrators' perceptions of their influence and constraints to that influence.

Influence

I believe that throughout our world of human relationships, influence can be viewed as a purposeful act in which an influence agent must make strategic choices among influence targets. By the very nature of their positions in schools, administrators are either influence agents or targets. When administrators are acting as an influence agent, they are usually trying to get things done through people. As discussed in the introduction of the new ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management book (1989) *School Leadership: Handbook for Excellence*, leadership or the act of influencing is best

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described as getting things done through people. Thus just as administrators use their influence, they also perceive issues that constrain their influence.

In organizations such as schools, I have called the act of influencing others *administrative influence* and issues that constrain administrative influence *district constraints* and *school-building constraints*.

This article highlights administrators' comments in personal interviews and answers to survey questions about their administrative influence, district constraints, and school-building constraints.

OSSC Report

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What I found was that the people who occupy the superintendency perceived themselves as the key influence agents within their school districts. In addition, superintendents did not perceive district constraints to be as great a problem as did their subordinates, but answered questions about school-building constraints in a manner similar to their subordinates.

Superintendent: The Key Influence Agent

When responding to the survey, superintendents considered their ability to influence district policies and decisions as their greatest asset in guiding the educational quality within their districts. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), superintendents' average administrative influence score was 4.5, whereas principals', vice principals', and other administrators' average scores were 3.8, 3.7, and 3.7, respectively. Thus superintendents' answers suggest that they perceive themselves as the key influence agent in the development of policies that guide a traditional educational system; correspondingly, principals', vice principals', and other administrators' answers suggest that they did not perceive themselves as the key influence agent, but rather a potential agent or target of the superintendent.

When interviewed, superintendents were asked about what characteristics of their system enabled them to do their job effectively. One superintendent responded, "I have a good school board with an understanding of policy development and the district has a good system for hiring staff and evaluating principals." Another superintendent talked about an "ability to work with school board members in



Randy Powell

setting district goals, establishing policies, working with the community at large, and the overall management of the school curriculum program" as a means to influence the people throughout the school district.

A superintendent in a large district contended that "I have established an organizational plan under which I administer only one operating program, and that is, working with the school board in the development of policies, while I delegate the rest, and then observe, and facilitate my colleagues' performing of their jobs."

Other comments from superintendents show that they perceive themselves as a key influence agent: "I have a very supportive board; it gives me almost full autonomy," and "I have a good strong board; they allow me to do the job."

Since superintendents perceived themselves to be the key influence agent throughout their districts, then they must take on the responsibility for guiding policies and decisions toward educational challenges such as the ones John Erickson pointed out in the Winter 1989 *OSSC Report*, "The Next Step: Preparing Students for a Changing Society." That article calls for people who influence the education of our young people to cooperate in setting aside inappropriate perceptions that interfere with the advancement of educational quality and promote new educational paradigms that will prepare our young people for a dynamic society.

Constraints to Administrative Influence: Superintendents' Perspectives

When asked what characteristics of their organization interfered with their ability to do their job effectively, five of the interviewed superintendents answered "none." Other superintendents mentioned the following constraints:

- "Collective bargaining policies, contracts, and activities are confrontational in nature and promote discord."
- "Lack of legal authority to intervene in schools."
- "Staff doing 'end runs' to bypass immediate supervisors," "Nepotism."
- "Negative policies. In-bred structure, especially at the elementary level, and poor communication with building administrators," "Time required away from central office," "School board."
- "The fact that time is allowed for all to express themselves, communicating views is very time-consuming; agreement comes slowly; decisions are very deliberate. At times it seemed to take forever to reach decisions; once made, though, they are quickly acted on."

Those comments seem to imply that superintendents perceive constraints to be a rational and natural part of the organizational structure of schools. But what about those administrators who are further away from the final source of decision-making? Might they sense a lack of flexibility or support from their superior(s)? As we shall see, administrators' positions may affect their perceptions of influence and constraints.

Principals and Vice Principals: Position Accounts for Perceived Influence and Constraints

Desiring more influence on district decisions seemed to be a predominant issue among principals. The following examples from interviews with principals suggest that they perceived their position as a constraint to participation in district policy development and decision-making. One remark from a superintendent highlights some of the apparent differences between superintendents' and principals' perceptions: "I have realigned job descriptions for principals. Principals are accountable for their own schools." This statement reveals an assumption that principals are accountable for their schools, but that

they are constrained by policies and decisions they are not able to control or influence. Thus it appeared that principals' perceptions of their influence and constraints varied on the basis of their proximity to a person or group of people who are held accountable by state statute for policies and decisions made throughout the district.

One female principal reported that there were "many restraints with curriculum by the district. Principals are restricted on input into curriculum, [and] their ability to 'make a difference', but are required to implement and evaluate programs." This principal appears to say that her ability to influence policies and decisions within her district is out of her control because of the structure of the educational system.

Another principal reported that the job responsibility she is most pessimistic about is the "task of influencing district policy that reorganizes jobs . . . reorganization has a built-in self-destruction . . . people don't like change."

A male principal talked about his "inability to access and influence the decision makers at the central office" as a characteristic of his job that interfered with his ability to influence district policy and decisions.

A female principal mentioned that "some members of the superintendent's staff tend to be imprecise in their directions and actions," making her pessimistic about her job responsibilities.

Principals also expressed their perceived inability to influence policies in other ways:

- "Simply lack of time to do justice to my job [because] central office requirements get in the way."
- "Central office requirements, the climate. . . . I am frustrated and somewhat pessimistic about the central office [and] building principal relations. I would like to see more informal participation by central office personnel."
- "My inability to protect the classroom teachers from the bureaucracy and a multitude of administrative activities which make it difficult to teach their classes."
- "Amount of hours processing bureaucratic paper."
- "There are a number of verbal demands that are contradictions between the people in the central office. I get 'wordy' memos that make little sense and when [I] confront [them, I am] side tracked."

Those comments imply that, because of their

closer proximity to the instruction of students, principals were being pulled in two directions at once; namely, the need to support central office demands and to support staff, student, and parent demands. I believe the comments suggest that when principals have to balance the conflicting roles of influence agent and target, then the traditional organizational structure becomes organizational interference, causing principals to lose valuable time for their influence on educational quality within the school building.

Organizational Interference: Principals' and Vice Principals' Perspectives

When asked what characteristics of their organization interfered with their ability to do their jobs effectively, principals and vice principals responded with similar comments. One principal replied: "needing to respond to some particular problem such as a board member's request for a research of data which may require a great deal of time to prepare." A vice principal's comment was similar: "Demands that come from central office that aren't coordinated. They keep asking for more information that has already been provided in another format to someone [else at the central office]."

Another principal mentioned "difficulties with maintenance department, upkeep of buildings, relationships with some central administrators. Paperwork for routine reports is a nagging problem." A vice principal talked about too many reports when he said, "We make out numerous reports that don't seem to do anything. For example, a special education report took much time and we have seen no results."

A principal mentioned that "some board members become too involved in areas better left to the superintendent, principal, or teacher," and a vice principal said, "Interferences [to education] are mainly self-imposed [by educators]."

Another principal believed that "there is too much pandering to pressure groups and parents and individuals who have unique and specific requests. For example, some parents demand that they want their child in a certain teacher's classroom and no one else's. The district has advertised that specific teachers are available for individual children. That causes problems for principals and teachers." A vice principal mentioned a similar belief when he

said the "longevity of staff members may make change difficult" because parents become familiar with them, causing "staff to be slow at accepting necessary changes."

As the interview comments have shown, superintendents' perceptions of district constraints differ from those of principals and vice principals. Superintendents seem to attribute district constraints to a lack of support from staff members who do not follow through with district decisions and policies, whereas principals and vice principals seem to attribute district constraints to a lack of support from central office personnel who do not understand their individual school building problems and personal biases.

One conclusion that might be drawn from this difference in the perspectives of the district's chief executive officer and its building administrators is that all administrators must engage in active, honest, and regular communication where they actively enlist dialogue about issues and then support one another. In addition, I believe that all staff within a school district must realize that support for organizational decisions must be consistent throughout a district for the advancement of educational quality to take place.

Superintendents' and Other Administrators' Perspectives about Support

As noted in the section on superintendent perspectives, superintendents talked about support from their school board and their ability to influence policy development and to direct district decisions as a way to get things done. On the whole, superintendents implied they would be more influential if their policies and decision were carried out with fewer objections from principals, vice principals, and other administrators, and if school board members' relationships with district staff members were more professional than personal.

For example, one superintendent stated that "relationships between building level administrators and school board members caused board members to be more concerned about social [relationships] than professional [relationships] and educational goals."

Thus far I have recorded the perspectives of superintendents and principals. What do other administrators think about their ability to influence

district policy and decisions? One business manager mentioned that "the bureaucracy of a large system is cumbersome." According to this manager, "the lack of personalization in administering policies of the district—a rule is a rule period"—interfered with his ability to influence other school district members. Moreover, a curriculum director talked about how the "administration gets in the way" as a characteristic of her organization that interfered with her effectiveness. Other sources of interference mentioned by other administrators were as follows:

- "Politics—no one told me how hard it was to work with people [central office and school-building] who had so many different philosophies toward a common objective or educational goal."
- "Occasional resistance from administrators to change."
- "A strong feeling of insecurity because of the abrupt manner of a recent transfer. I am not sure where I will be from day to day."
- "At times the lack of sensitivity of some staff people that work with kids."
- "Doing research for meetings with two bargaining organizations during negotiations interfered with my job."

In the areas of administrative influence and district constraints, it is quite evident that administrators' perceptions are affected by their positions. No such difference pertains to administrators' perceptions of several other issues, including school-building constraints.

More Similarities Than Differences

An intriguing finding from the survey data was that superintendents', other administrators', principals', and vice principals' perceptions did not differ significantly about any of the following school-building constraint questions:

- How much of a problem has resistance to new ideas at the building level been this past year?
- How much of a problem has the teaching staff not performing up to your expectations been this past year?
- How much of a problem has friction between teachers and administrators been this past year?
- How much of a problem has friction among teachers been this past year?

- How much of a problem has poor communication between administrators and teachers at the building level been this past year?

Nor did the administrators report that these issues significantly constrained their influence.

In addition to the apparent agreement about school-building issues, I found that administrators did not significantly vary their answers to several additional issues contained within the survey. For example, for the following survey questions, the scale ranged from 1 (very little) to 5 (a great deal), and the average scores among the administrative levels did not vary more than four-tenths of a point.

How much:

- influence on student success do you have?
- influence do you have on teacher performance?
- influence on state education policy do you have?
- support from your subordinates do you have?
- support from your community do you have?

Moreover, the scale for the following set of issues ranged from 1 (not a problem) to 5 (a significant problem), and again the average scores among the administrative levels did not vary more than four-tenths of a point.

How much of a problem has each of the following issues been?:

- negative consequences of teacher tenure
- adversarial nature of collective bargaining
- the inability to provide teacher time for planning
- inability to obtain adequate funding
- insufficient space and physical facilities
- time taken by administrative details at the expense of other matters

- apathetic or hostile parents
- the "at risk" student dropping out
- hostile or inaccurate media
- limitations imposed by state and federal regulations
- pressure for school reform agenda and public expectations
- litigation from students and parents

A Call to Capitalize on the Strength of Unity

Through the hours of reflection about the data reported here, I concluded that Oregon public school administrators perceive issues throughout their school systems with greater similarity than differences. It is, therefore, feasible for Oregon school administrators to focus their influence, wisdom, and energy toward a common target: namely, look at what we already know about education and use it with new technology to advance educational quality for our young people. This call for united action is based on the fact that school administrators have predominantly similar thoughts about educational issues. If administrators capitalize on their unity by focusing their influence and support on seeking a common goal, that goal will become a reality within a relatively short time.

In conclusion, I believe that it is time to truly support our traditional key influence agent (the superintendent) in developing new paradigms that will put insignificant differences aside and take the next step: preparing our young people for the demands of a changing society.